

## **An endangered appeal to research!**

Dear students at the Institute,

Your second or fourth semester has just begun and many of you might consider applying for the PhD program at our Institute these days. Being myself a PhD student in the second year now, I think it is time to portray some of the issues related to the daily struggle we are grappling with.

Let me briefly summarise the context of science and education in Europe at the moment. I lived and studied in Vienna until some years ago and was part of the student protests that started in Vienna last year to spread out over Europe within a few months. Our main claims were

- 1) higher national budgets for higher education, ideally leading to generally better circumstances and supervision of students,
- 2) democratisation inside universities and transparency at the international level, where education policies are made,
- 3) a revamped implementation and pan-European standardisation of the new bachelor/master/PhD-programs,
- 4) a general shift towards “the higher social and personal good of education” (“Bildung”) from rather economically dictated notions of education as formation or vocational training (“Ausbildung”).

Along these lines was the gained awareness that the new<sup>1</sup> tripartite study programs will ultimately lead to a differentiation not only in the “quality” of content taught within the new levels, but also in the price we have to pay for entering a “higher” level. Increases of tuition fees in several countries in the last years, with the probably most extreme case of the UK in 2010, justify this point of view. Nowadays, bachelor studies are only a kind of addition to school licenses for studying: while giving degree holders a slight specialisation for a future job (and refurbishing national statistics about academic levels in a country), they also function as a selection mechanism for students who are able (also financially) to enter the next level. Typical master studies in Europe nowadays, serve primarily as a formation tool to educate the enormous workforce necessary for administering the European economy and bureaucracy, based on provision of services. Packed with too much courses, a similar-to-school seminar schedule, tight deadlines for papers, etc., there is little, if any, space left for in-depth reflection, discussion, discovery and creation of personal interests – or even commitment in

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<sup>1</sup> „New“, because in the old German, Austrian, Swiss, Italian and maybe some Eastern European study systems, there were only two programs: Magister studies and doctoral studies – taken together typically lasting for 6-7 years.

student movements related to the own university.

The result is a highly competitive, individualist student body who has too little time for everything and works under constant pressure with only one aim – the supposed secure dream job. The problem is that such mechanisms of erosion of, what was once positively connoted, solidarity support strong vertical hierarchies. Bureaucrats and specious lobbying institutes of education research are nowadays easily able to design study programs that serve predominantly only one master – the industry. There is one solution left, one might argue, namely to go for a PhD. Here, true personal education and dedication to your subject of study becomes ostensibly possible under constant and sometimes even personal supervision of your thesis director. Yet, in the following I would like to tell you about the real situation of PhD students at the Institute (and not only there).

Let me start by stating that I am mainly referring to the development studies unit, or department – as it will be re-named soon. Problems in this unit are in part due to its specific recent history, and to the nature of its subject, but giving the cross-discipline problematique of the most pressing issues in a globalising world, they are of prime importance for all units. Of course, I can only speak from my personal point of view. It seems obvious that the programs in law and economy do not share exactly the same issues for three reasons: Firstly, econ and law have a drastically lower number of students. Secondly, they educate primarily for private or public business and have always done so. Thirdly, it is much easier for these units (including history and politics) to attract research funding from outside and even from private sources, since their results can be used by business and governments, in one form or another. On the contrary, critical studies on development (cross-disciplinary by nature) – after all, the most common and dominant narrative of modernity – have a problem of getting sufficiently funded, even though its results could eventually lead to even better business (in terms of, let's say, sustainability or life-quality).

Furthermore, there is the issue of the fusion of the former HEI and IUED which still causes several problems among units, professors, administration and eventually even students. You will probably have noticed that there is no PhD program in development studies offered anymore – which can be seen as a result of the fusion – but two new programs that claim benefits for students through higher specialisation. That development is globally narrowed down to an understanding of “development economics” is, in my point, very regrettable, but also expressed in the shift which the Institute undertook (think of all the powerful combinations with development that are more or less excluded from now on – technical studies, IT, human rights, or, as in my case, even philosophy). The new PhD in Socio-/Anthropology is explicitly more broadly understood than the former development anthropology taught at the Institute. Indeed, the master program of development

studies remains (since it is in high demand by students, despite more than dubious career outcomes), but it will not automatically lead to a potential application for the PhD program anymore!<sup>2</sup> What does that mean?

Master students will typically be guided through a very intense two-years training in buzzwords and workload completion, which should enable them to set up proposals, log-frames, analyses, reports, etc. in very little time (in future – I am familiar with the critiques many students issued about the program today, including the “less-practical application” approach.). This is on the one hand necessary to work in the myriads of NGOs and multilateral organisations out there, but it discourages and eventually eradicates all idealism of changing the global status quo, because there is little further examination and contestation possible anymore (nor taught) beyond all the buzzwords and superficial development strategies. In-depth analysis, reflection and change become impossible; adaptation, seen as a key to success, is the slogan of the actual losers.

Studying at PhD-level now, as many might consider it, could enable some of us to question this status quo more successfully<sup>3</sup>. But the reality at the institute is different, because most of our time is actually used for writing research proposals or reports in order to get funding/to obtain scholarships or simply to apply for jobs that are less-related to our research. That, what we mainly do, is writing about what we want to write! Personally, I wrote about 10 scholarship applications in the last 1,5 years (each of which needs about 20 pages plus time schedule, etc.). In addition, our financial situation is constantly unstable, as you get usually funded only for several months or a year at best. Such uncertainty makes having a family, for example, very complicated. Working as an assistant at the institute is almost impossible, since there are few positions available and employment contracts are usually made for 1 year (which will be almost automatically renewed for up to 4 years in total). And to be honest, to copy texts for readers and administering classes, it is not worth paying these salaries, neither does it much for our research or later professionalism in teaching. Even those who are assistants gain almost no practical experience in teaching and tutoring, which they will need when they apply for post-docs and compete with, for example, students from British universities who have been teaching for 3 years a few hours a week – preparing classes, managing discussions, giving and grading assignments. The problem is, that we are surrounded by amazingly skilled people, but we have few situations where we can learn from them as teachers and researchers. There is no transfers of skills, unless from the books we find.

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2 In order to do so, you will need to have a further specialisation additionally, ie. in economy or socio-/anthropology.

3 And it remains unanswered, why educational architects want to sort out first, from bachelor to PhD level, the ones able to think and engage critically. Would it not lead to a levelling down even on the „higher“ levels?

The point is that students end up not focusing on doing actual research. Such jobs might help us to survive financially, but keep us from reading and writing (I don't say that more adequate jobs, especially teaching, would not actually help us). Even the full scholarship generously granted by the institute to some of us is only paid for 10 months (as if you had holidays at all as a PhD student) and is only provided for one year. To be renewed, you have to be lucky and very poor (which is paradoxical) and - what else - to apply again. Of course, it is part of our education to become familiar with writing proposals, to be competitive, to learn how to “sell our research” (even if I don't understand that point), and it would generally be less of a problem – if the other side, the research itself, would prosper sufficiently. And that is exactly the crux of the matter.

Having seen several other institutes and universities in my life, I have to admit that we PhD students (and not only us here at the IHEID) desperately miss informal support and supervision at and from the Institute. The issue with the assistantship is just one point, knowing to produce a two-class-system of PhD students. Assistants usually also get an office and - due to their presence - have a stronger network. Funding is the other side of the framework, but both, even together, is not what could improve our situation substantially. At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), which is linked to the University of Sussex in a similar fashion to our link with the University of Geneva, for example, they adopted full policies for PhD's, including funding, research and space facilities, conferences, publications, career services (for research), and constant and secured exchange with many different professors and colleagues. Even if they have less DPhil students than just the development unit at IHEID, there is a DPhil convenor whose role is to link the students with the rest of IDS, to organize presentations and make sure their voice is being heard. Once you are in, you are on track. There is so much around you, there is a lot less chance to get lost in isolation and solitude, searching for possible funding and writing proposals/applications, by individually inventing the wheel again and again. Here are some links that could be useful for the one or another among you (and please look at where they come from):

Vitae - programme national de promotion des jeunes chercheurs:

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>

Some resources for PhD students:

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/1218/Postgraduate-researchers.html>

The Concordat to support the career development of researchers:

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ResearchCareers/Pages/Concordat.aspx>

Career services dedicated to research staff, including post-graduate researchers:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/careers/aboutus/researchstaff>

Research Hive: an example of a physical space dedicated to PhD students in the library:

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/researchhive/>

In stark contrast to this, there is the situation at the Institute, where most PhD students don't even know what other professors in their unit are researching! There is almost no exchange among students and professors (I have heard of cases where students dropped out of the program after 5 years! Where is the contact between supervisor and student in such cases?), there is sometimes even no interest, sometimes patronising relations, and sometimes interpersonal conflicts between professors being taken out on students. As a result, there is an almost complete absence of joint research projects, through which students could be employed, no such policies<sup>4</sup> as mentioned above (everything has to be negotiated in more or less non-transparent procedures), no secure funding, no constant and regular communication<sup>5</sup> about professional and technical progress (such as a series of papers internally published and circulating). It all culminates in an enormous idle state of potentially brilliant resources, characterised by discouragement and disengagement on both the student's and professor's side. That's why there are no real research centres of gravity at the institute – combining students, external professionals and professors from both the institute (across units) and also UniGE (hey, we are part of!). That is also why so many PhD students drop out or, as in development, go on field research as long as possible with the aim of spending as little time as possible in Geneva: there is no reason to be at the Institute when you have not even a space where to sit.

Besides these huge unused synergies, the waste of efficiency, of time and eventually even money (that could be used for proper funding instead), it is even more regrettable, since all our suggestions for improvements are on the table for about a year now! Since the fall of 2009, a group of PhD students in development has been trying to work with the Institute to improve the situation; surveys were made, proposals were submitted, meetings were held. Some positive change did follow, notably a restructuring of the allocation of scholarships and a good intention to employ someone for finding more funding opportunities by disseminating them to all students – a vacant position that has never took office since then<sup>6</sup>.

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4 There is the règlement d'études – which is more a code of conduct, including many obligations on our side and few on the side of the institute.

5 I do explicitly not mean announcements of conferences, invitations for cocktails, career news or that like.

6 And the general reform of the doctorate, which helped maybe some professors but did not improve our situation.

You will probably ask for the reason of this huge mess. I can only hint at three reasons. Firstly, there is the said strong vertical hierarchy as a result of a general shift in education. Secondly, there is a constant reference made from the top of the hierarchy to the changes that will take place once the magic bullet, la Maison de la Paix and the fusion of the institutes, will be completed. But this will take years and we, the current students, argue that this does clearly not concern us. Stuck in between two systems, we are getting the worst of both worlds and it is not a pleasant position to be in. Thirdly, and this is the unsaid knowledge of many people at the Institute, there is the infantile antics of some of the staff in the development unit, where people rather fight against each other, instead of doing their job properly. What is their job? While research and teaching certainly are essential aspects of a professor or a lecturer's job, support for graduate students is also essential – as long as academia has existed, it has been the role of established intellectuals to train new generations. Sadly, our professors cannot put their disengagement with students on the back of their research: the general output of peer-reviewed articles, interviews and monographs does not compare well to other similar institutes and also to the relatively high number of professors in the unit. I think, we could assume, that they would need strong support in their own professional interest - also in setting up projects, researching and writing - by committed and well-qualified doctoral students.

What is missing in this Institute, and especially in the development unit, is true intellectual exchange, between researchers who are at different points in their careers, but who share a passion for their work. A generally broader hierarchy, weekly or even daily informal meetings among professors and students (without the pervasive sandwiches and juice/wine tables) in order to discuss our research, also across units, a strong participation of students in implementing feasible policies for them – this would be a recipe for addressing the burning issues adequately our world is exposed to. In questions of development, ecology, finance and capitalisation, global institutions, migrants, health, and many more, there is no longer a real answer/solution/analysis to find in a non-trans-disciplinary manner. Cooperation, making use of synergies and broad horizontal hierarchies are the key to a more efficient future – also in research claiming excellency for itself.

Finally, if you think you can actively contribute to what I tried to criticise, to sketch out and to appeal at, than - don't worry - you fit perfectly for a PhD study. Which, by the way, is definitely still a good way to learn about yourself and how academics work in practice. Even if I portrayed the situation maybe a bit frowning, there is still space left for personal subject-related development – but the noose gets tightened more and more and it is therefore time to stand against!

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